

A SURE AND LIVING HOPE

Wisdom 3. 1-9

1 Peter 1. 3-9

John 6. 37-40

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We have come here today because it is our life's task to hold in our minds and hearts those who are given to us through our families, and as friends, colleagues and neighbours. This task goes beyond the boundaries of life and death. For our loved ones and for all of us, it matters that we shall not be forgotten, that we leave behind some trace of ourselves in the memories and experiences of those with whom we have shared our lives. And this is why we have come tonight; to do what the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke called 'heart-work': 'heart-work' for the dead, whom we remember in love and thanksgiving, and in our prayers.

This remembrance and these prayers matter to the dead; and they matter to those of us who are living.

In the gospel reading given for All Souls' Day, our Lord says, 'And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.' You see, the ask of Jesus is to raise our entire human selves and history; to raise all that we are, and will have been; and as we remember the dead tonight, we take comfort that they are as known and precious to God as they are to us. To remember the dead truly is to see them enfolded in God's everlasting love; to know that in him, all the fragments of human life are gathered up. 'Nothing is lost', our Lord says.

As we remember the dead, there is hope. There is indeed good news which is based not on wishful thinking, but which is founded upon historical reality. For the resurrection of our Lord from the dead gives us a sure and living hope that death is not the end – that death does not have the final word. Christ has gone through the door marked ‘death’ and has come forth from the grave, triumphing over it.

Although all that we see around us might be subject to decay and ultimately perish, the resurrection of Jesus Christ holds out for us the real promise of eternal life for all who put their trust in him – the promise of a heavenly home where all is imperishable. Without that hope, death continues to be our enemy, and to hold us hostage. But the power of the Christian hope is stronger than the fear of death.

So we are to face death with the eyes of faith: faith in our God who is greater than death; faith in Jesus Christ, who has conquered death and who gives eternal life to all who put their trust in him. For we have this deep assurance that those who have died in Christ will rise again. Death is not the end. It might be the end of this life as we know it; but it is also the beginning – the beginning of the perfect life with God beyond the grave.

Later in this service, we will hear the names read out of those whom we love who have departed this life, whose memory is precious to us. We give thanks to God for them and all they have meant to us. We give thanks for the memories that we treasure, the good times we shared together, the impact they have had upon our lives and upon the lives of others, and for who they were in themselves. And we commend them to God’s protection and mercy.

As we remember our departed loved ones, we do so in the context of another act of remembrance, the Eucharist – taking, breaking and sharing bread and wine in remembrance of our Lord who died and rose for us. This remembrance gives us a sure and confident hope. It is a foretaste of that day when, as the Eucharistic Prayer will remind us, the Lord will gather into his kingdom all who share the one bread and one cup so that we, in the company of all the saints and all the faithful departed, may praise and glorify God for ever through Jesus Christ our risen Lord.

Amen.